

LSC 30th Anniversary Celebration

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Welcome to the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the Legal Services Corporation.

It is an honor for me to serve as LSC President as it celebrates this important milestone, and I am grateful that so many friends and supporters of LSC, both past and present, are here to celebrate with us today.

Our program is entitled “Pride in the Past – Vision for the Future.” We gather to reflect on the proud history of LSC, its formation and its first 30 years, and to consider the challenges and goals for its future, and to recommit ourselves to LSC’s mission -- to promote equal access to our system of justice for low-income people throughout the United States who could not otherwise afford civil legal representation, and to ensure the provision of high quality legal services to the eligible poor [in conformity with the mandates of Congress].

This event is truly extraordinary. For the first time, nearly all of the Executive Directors of LSC-funded programs have gathered in

one place. This is an opportunity for us to learn from each other and we will have that opportunity tomorrow in sessions we have planned for the executive directors on the subjects of leadership in the face of change, quality performance and how to reframe critical poverty issues. We will have a futurist discuss the changing demographics of poverty in the next decade, and then have an opportunity to hear each others ideas and suggestions as we plan our future work together.

Our hope is that with renewed vigor and dedication, our executive directors will go back to the approximately 10,000 staff in LSC funded programs with action-oriented messages to build stronger support for equal access to justice.

The goal of this meeting is to provide an opportunity to develop our future agenda together. It is the first opportunity as a team to plan for the future. And I would like to ask all of the executive directors to stand and I know we all want to applaud them for the great work they do and the leadership they provide.

We are joined today by many of the individuals responsible for developing the initial concept of federally-funded legal services for the poor and advocating for the creation of an independent, non-profit

corporation that became LSC, and for insuring its survival through the years. The leadership of LSC throughout its history—Board Chairs, Board directors and past LSC Presidents—are well represented here today. We are also joined by leaders in the judiciary, the private bar (State Bar Presidents, and Chairs of State Equal Justice Commissions), IOLTA programs and partner organizations (including leaders of the National Legal Aid and Defender Association, the American Bar Association, the Center for Law and Social Policy, and the Management Information Exchange), and important friends in Congress, whose support for LSC is most vital.

We are all here because we are committed to ensuring that the poor have equal access to justice and because of our commitment to the larger ideal of “justice for all.” As former Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, who as President of the American Bar Association provided critical early support to the idea of publicly-funded legal services, stated: “Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the façade of the Supreme Court building. It is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society . . . it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status.”

The ideal of equal justice is one of our most deeply rooted principles. It is found in the Bible, in Deuteronomy Chapter 16, Verse 20, which states “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive.” The legal origins are found in the Magna Carta, which provided “To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay, right or justice.” The Preamble to our Constitution affirms that its central purpose is to “establish justice.” And for over 100 years we have pledged allegiance to our flag “with liberty and justice for all.”

As lofty as the ideal is, the reason that LSC was formed, and the reason our work must continue, is that we have not achieved that ideal. The individual rights that we cherish must often be secured or defended in our courts, and having access to the specialized skills of a lawyer is almost always necessary to navigate our complex legal system. For the poor, legal redress is often required to obtain essential needs: protection from abusive relationships, habitable housing, necessary health care, disability payments, child support, relief from financial exploitation, and more. But lacking the means to afford a lawyer, the poor often face proceedings where decisions on whether a person retains custody of his or her child, or a roof over

their head, or obtains medical treatment are made without the assistance of counsel.

It was to address this injustice that many of you urged the creation of LSC 30 years ago, so that federal funds could be used to provide civil legal assistance to the poor throughout the United States. Since that time, we have helped millions of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society with their pressing civil legal needs and have made meaningful differences in their lives. But the fact remains that so many of those who are eligible for our assistance cannot receive it. The demand for our services is great and growing, and our available resources cannot support the services to meet it.

Our challenge is to continue to provide access to justice and help ensure that it is available to all in our society, not just to those who can afford it. We are together today because we believe that civil legal services for the poor is central to fundamental fairness, due process, and equal protection under the law. Today, we celebrate an important milestone, but our journey is far from over. This gathering is an opportunity for all of us to reaffirm our resolve to continue working to make justice for all a reality, and not merely an aspiration.

Our program focuses on both our past and our future. At your seats and in the back of the room are copies of LSC's Annual Report for 2003-2004 which recounts some of our recent achievements. We hope you will find it informative. In addition, there is a special issue of our Equal Justice magazine commemorating the 30th anniversary of LSC, which we hope you will also find interesting.

Our celebration also recognizes the importance of and pays tribute to some of LSC's key supporters critical to our past survival and to our continued vitality—the state judiciary, the American Bar Association, our other partners at the national level and the bipartisan support of members of Congress.

